

Something to Believe In

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Something to Believe In

by [emjee \(MerryHeart\)](#)

Summary

“Come and find me when you’ve figured out what you actually want, and until then,” she gives him a light smack to the side of the face, “stay out of my trade negotiations.”

Or, after the war, Alina rules Ravka as part of a triumvirate. This system of government would work better if the Darkling would stop interfering with her diplomatic affairs in an attempt to get her attention.

Notes

Real quick, before we begin--I haven't read the books and I haven't given a huge amount of thought to how the end of the war and the governing system represented here came about. The idea of a triumvirate of Nikolai, Alina, and the Darkling owes a great deal to [Alinochka](#) by neonheartbeat, which I highly recommend. I'm definitely working off of show canon here, with a couple details gleaned from the book series wiki thrown in.

Many thanks to Megan Thee Stallion for providing the thesis of this fic: Put him on his knees, give him something to believe in.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Genya has just finished preparing tea for herself and David when they hear a door slam at the far end of the corridor, followed by furious footsteps. David glances at the clock.

“Just as you predicted,” he says. “Almost down to the minute.” Genya hands him a glass in a gilded holder and settles into the chair across from him. “Who was the meeting with today? The Kerch?”

“Fjerdans.”

“Ah.”

The footsteps pass by the door to Genya’s suite and continue down the hall.

“Open the door a crack, will you?” Genya asks. “I want to see if we get a light show.”

The door to the study bangs open behind him, and he allows himself a small smile.

“Aleksander Mikhailovich Morozov.”

He continues staring into the marble fireplace, not bothering to turn around. Let her come to him, if she’s so furious. “My father wasn’t called Mikhail.”

She knows this. Well, not precisely—she knows that he will say this to her every time she tries a new patronymic, whether she has guessed correctly or not. This is not a fairy tale, where dangerous creatures are compelled to answer to their true names.

He knows all her names—Sun Summoner, Sun Queen, Sankta Alina, Alina Petrovna Starkova. It isn’t fair.

She is Alina Petrovna to the Fjerdans, at the negotiating table, from which she has just come. “Would you like to explain why you attempted to fuck over the trade deal I’ve spent weeks working on? Look at me when I’m speaking to you!”

She tosses a ball of light at the back of his head. He douses it with a handful of shadows.

“Five centuries old and you’re still such a child,” she sighs, but she comes to stand between him and the fire. He updates the score in his head—one for the patronymic, one for making her cross the room to him, perhaps he’ll give himself one for infuriating her in the first place—and knows she is running the same tally.

“Please,” he drawls, “it’s closer to four and a half.”

“Explain yourself.”

She’s delicious when she’s angry like this, he thinks, leaning back in his high backed chair and crossing one ankle over the other. It’s almost too easy. “We don’t negotiate with most dedicated Grisha-killers the world has ever seen.”

“If you had bothered to show up to any of the meetings with the delegation, or any of the meetings Nikolai and I have had about—”

“Yes, what I wish most of all at this point in my long life is to witness your cozy little tête-à-têtes—”

“You are a fool.” Alina begins to pace back and forth in front of the fire, flexing her hands. *You cannot strangle him*, she tells herself, *no matter how tempting it is*.

Tempting in more ways than one, if she is honest with herself, but now is not the time.

“The agreement I have just managed to save is a huge step toward securing a treaty with extradition policies that favor us. The trade deal heavily favors the Fjerdan trade that comes to us by sea, from Djerholm to Os Kervo. Everything that comes to us by land is still subject to stronger restrictions and higher tariffs, in no small part because I don’t want Fjerdan traders coming farther in than the port cities.”

“A feeling grounded in self-preservation at the very least. But it won’t make much of a dent in their profits; the Fjerdans are sailors born, so I fail to see—”

“Won’t it be a shame, then when the True Sea is scourged by the worst rash of piracy in living memory. After the treaty is signed, of course, which will be sooner rather than later if you stop interfering.”

That’s actually rather good. He frowns, searching for a crack. “You cannot stop all of their trade that way.”

She answers with a smile that very strongly implies a rude hand gesture. “Of course some goods will have to come through Os Kervo, but there are ways to ensure that next to nothing makes it up the Sokol.”

“They will hold you responsible for dealing with the problem.”

“But you must understand,” she says sweetly, and he realizes this is her negotiation voice, suffused with a sunshine that utterly deflects the listener’s attention from the steel trap that is her mind. “Ravka is recovering from a war; what money she has must be used to feed her people. We have agreed to most gracious terms, and if they do not unfold in practice, well.” She spreads her hands, palms up, light dancing around her fingertips. “It is the will of the saints.”

It takes an effort for him to keep his face from showing anything other than a carefully schooled neutrality. “It is the will of Sankta Alina,” he says. “Holy and blameless.”

“Hardly,” she snaps. “But seeing as you absented yourself from every meeting in every step of this process until your little performance this morning, which almost cost us the whole thing, I don’t think you get an opinion.”

“I am the oldest living Grisha,” he replies, “and this is Fjerda. Of course I get an opinion.”

“So you would do—what? Raze the country to the ground? Salt the earth you leave behind?”
Good luck getting through the permafrost, for one thing.

“Is it not what they deserve?” He is on his feet almost without realizing it; there are shadows growing in the corners of the room.

“It is not their deserving I am concerned with, Aleksander!” Light is beginning to twist itself around her hands. “This isn’t about the thrice-damned Fjerdans,” she continues, her voice low. “This is about Grisha. You could shroud Fjerda in darkness and I could scorch it until the snow melts and the earth beneath it cracks, and that will not make us safe. *Fear* will not make us safe.”

“I disagree.”

“I know!” She throws her hands up, narrowly missing his face, and gives up on keeping her voice down. “You might remember when you tried to use an enormous piece of dark magic you created four hundred years as a weapon and *I didn’t let you.*” They are standing practically nose to nose; she is tempted to stand on her tiptoes to mitigate how he looms over her, but she’s concerned about what it would do to her balance. The last thing she wants to do is topple into his arms.

“I was trying to protect us,” he protests.

“And I am trying to keep more children from becoming soldiers!” she cries, and he is forced to shut his eyes as the light around her hands expands to fill the room, accompanied by a crack like thunder.

When it is safe to open his eyes, he heaves a deep sigh and sits back down. If he continues to stand this close to her, he is bound to do something to earn a slap across the face.

His mind catches on that last thought in a way he doesn’t want to examine too closely.

“I know,” she continues, her voice softening, “that you were trying to protect us. I want them safe as much as you do. Do not think that just because I came to this life as a young woman instead of a young girl that I do not understand. I may not have lived as long as you, but I do not love them any less. And that love requires us to play the long game, which, as you have reminded me so many times, you and I will live long enough to see through. If we are doomed to outlast them all, let us be blessed to orchestrate a new world where Grisha do not have to be feared to be secure.”

“And that starts with pirates between Djerholm and Os Kervo?”

“And all the way up the Sokol,” she agrees, “if I have to sell all my jewels to pay them.”

“They’re intercepting Fjerdan goods, they’ll be rich enough.”

“And loyal.”

“Loyal only to their purse.”

“Tell me, O wisest and oldest of all the Grisha, what nation has the largest number of Squallers and Tidemakers.”

A smile twists one side of his mouth. He’s almost proud. “I thought you didn’t deal in fear.”

“I deal in pragmatism. It isn’t the same.”

He turns his gaze back to the fire. “Just a moment ago you were building castles in the air about a golden age for Grisha the likes of which the world has not yet seen.”

“There’s no winning with you, is there?” she sighs, exasperated. She moves to stand directly in front of him, the skirt of her kefta brushing against his knees, but he stares resolutely beyond her. Pushed to the limits of what little patience she has left, she takes his chin in her hand and forces him to look at her.

“I could have killed you and been worshipped for it. Instead I tied your fate to mine and let you live, of my own volition. You share the governance of the country you love with a tsar and a Sun Summoner, and yet you refuse to participate in half the governing we do. You say you want Grisha to be safe and you undermine me when I work for that very end, with no evidence of an alternate solution. What is it you *want*, Aleksander?”

His lips part, but no sound comes from them. Alina watches as his pupils dilate and a flush suffuses his face.

She is once again reminded—though she seldom forgets—that there’s a connection between them that has nothing to do with their power. She used to think that because so much of her previous desire was based on lies that the desire itself was a lie, but now she knows even in the full light of truth she still wants him. She just hasn’t allowed herself to give in yet.

She could climb into his lap right now and kiss him, over and over, like he’s a feast and she’s been fasting on bread and water. She could pull him to the floor, start unfastening his clothes. He would let her. He would let her do all of it, because he wants her just as badly, and she hopes he’s honest enough with himself to know that this isn’t exactly a secret.

But she’s a grown woman, and she doesn’t let herself have everything she wants.

“All Saints, Aleksander,” she sighs, pressing the pad of thumb to his lower lip. He’s gone perfectly still, like a creature who’s just noticed the archer in the underbrush. “You vex me.”

His mouth has always been horribly tempting, and she takes her hand away before either of them can get any ideas. (Any *more* ideas.)

“Come and find me when you’ve figured out what you actually want, and until then,” she gives him a light smack to the side of the face, “stay out of my trade negotiations.”

She strides out of the room and shuts the door behind her without slamming it. She doesn’t feel like slamming things now that she’s updated the ledger in her mind. She can’t decide how many points that smack was worth, but she knows definitively that she came out ahead.

As soon as he hears the door shut, Aleksander, not entirely aware of himself, slides out of the chair and onto the floor.

“Does it bother you,” Alina asks Genya over a late cup of tea several days later, “that we deal with Fjerda at all?”

“We aren’t yet strong enough not to,” Genya replies. “Until then, governing involves working with people you don’t want to eat with.” She tilts her head, then shrugs. “And eating with people you don’t want to eat with. You have clear priorities, lines you won’t cross, a canny mind, excellent counselors.” She preens a bit on that last one, and Alina laughs. “And while there may be people entitled to an explanation of your actions, Aleksander Morozov is not one of them.”

“Mm,” Alina replies, relaxing into her chair and closing her eyes.

“Have you gone to bed with him yet?” Genya asks.

Alina’s eyes fly right back open. “I—*yet*?”

“I’m sorry, did you think it isn’t obvious you want to? You two glare at each other from across a dinner table and I start wondering if we’ll have to clear the room.”

“What happened to ‘beware of powerful men’?”

“Time,” Genya says, “and circumstances. You are at least as powerful as he is politically, possibly more; if you ever needed to stage a coup—”

“Saints’ sake, Evgenia, keep your voice down.”

“*Are* we staging a coup?”

“Absolutely not, and I don’t want anyone getting any ideas.”

“Come now, you don’t think I’d be so indiscreet as that.” It’s true that they’re in Genya’s innermost rooms, which, now that Alina considers it, have probably been soundproofed. “And in terms of Small Science, well, there’s a fight I wouldn’t like to see, but would feel confident enough to place a bet on. You’ve found your anger,” she continues, a small, proud smile on her face, “and you wear it well. That makes you powerful.”

“I do not want it to be all I am,” Alina murmurs, “but I am not sorry for it.”

“You shouldn’t be. It’s going to carry us all to brighter days.”

“Ha ha.”

“Would you believe me if I told you that was unintentional?”

“Absolutely not.”

Genya's question—*Have you gone to bed with him yet?*—haunts her for several weeks. It echoes in her mind when Aleksander first appears at a treaty negotiation, when he sits next to her at the supper they always take with the other Grisha in the dining hall on Wednesday evenings. *Do they expect me to?* she wonders. *Do they think I already am?*

She shouldn't be surprised, she supposes, if everyone thinks she's already bedded him. It's no secret that she won the war in part by binding his power to hers, although few people understand how that actually works. The storytellers are probably already turning it into a tale of how the Sun Saint bound the Lord of Shadows with a fine gold chain, or something like that. Some people likely assume that they are entangled in all aspects of their relationship.

She hasn't gone to bed with anybody in...a very long time. Not since the destruction of the Fold, the end of the war. The stress relief would have been nice as she worked to stabilize the government and the country, but the work in question left her with very little energy or time. Now she has the energy, and things are under control enough that she can make the time.

Aleksander reaches for the plate of honey cakes near her left hand, carefully avoiding her gaze and her touch. There's a swooping sensation in the pit of her stomach and fuck, she hates this, she isn't seventeen anymore.

She isn't seventeen anymore. She doesn't have to wait for someone else to say something first.

Still, she doesn't leave her rooms that night. She does make herself come twice, thinking of the look on Aleksander's face when she stroked her thumb across his lip.

Two weeks later, when she is still awake at three in the morning after a state dinner, she decides enough is enough.

If pressed, Alina will confess that she hasn't tired of the theatrics required by formal affairs. When the double doors swing open and she, Nikolai, and Aleksander stride shoulder-to-shoulder to the dais across the ballroom as a fanfare plays, when they turn as one and seat themselves on their thrones, Alina at Nikolai's right hand and Aleksander at his left, she cannot be anything other than proud of what they have built.

And tonight she is doubly proud, and not a little smug, because the evening's events are in honor of a preliminary treaty agreement with the Fjerdans. No ink has been expended as of yet, so nothing's certain, but the situation is stable enough that the lawyers are starting to draft the language. Once she has an extradition agreement in place, and—if the Saints smile on them—some kind of limited protection for Fjerdan Grisha (likely contingent on their relocation, but this is only the beginning of her plan), all hell will suddenly break loose on the True Sea. May all the Saints bless Nikolai and his discreet seafaring connections.

There is dancing after supper. She opens the ball with Nikolai and works her way through the requisite ambassadors and dignitaries. This is a game she has learned to play very well, thanks in large part to Genya. The charming wit, the graceful smile—all more theatrics, but

it's a role that so far has been successful in getting her what she wants, so she doesn't mind playing it.

Aleksander seems to be just out of the corner of her vision for most of the evening, but shortly past midnight he appears in front of her as if from nowhere.

She allows herself a brief eye roll. "Stepping straight out of the shadows? Honestly?"

He extends a hand. She blinks at him.

"What?" he says.

"Ask!"

"Dance with me."

"Try again. Perhaps with a more suitable inflection or a different grammatical construction."

They stare at each other for a long moment before something in his face softens. "Please dance with me, Sun Queen?"

She raises an eyebrow. She may be playing the Sun Queen for everyone else this evening, but she's not going to play a role for him.

He tries again. "Alina."

A small smile breaks through her disapproving expression before she can stop herself.

"My pleasure," she says, taking his proffered hand.

The orchestra transitions to one of Ravka's best-loved waltzes.

"Really? You waited for this one?" Alina says, as he pulls her close and they begin spinning around the dance floor.

"It's a classic for a reason."

"I bet you remember when it was written."

"It's only fifty years old, Alina, more than half the nobles in this room remember when it was written."

That doesn't seem like a correct percentage, but she lets it go. "I wasn't sure you would want to dance with me at all."

"Well, appearances must be maintained."

She snorts.

He clicks his tongue at her. "Not a very dignified sound from the Sun Queen."

“I bet you won’t make a very dignified sound if I step on your toes.”

“I will pick you up off the floor entirely before I let that happen.”

“How do you know you would notice in time? I could be very fast.”

He has no answer for that, and they fall silent. He is an infuriatingly good dancer, and she lets herself relax into his lead, enjoying the feeling of his fingers around hers, the gentle pressure of his other hand on her back as he guides them around the other dancers. What would happen if she just let herself have this?

“I know I’ve disappointed you,” she says, tilting her chin up the way she has seen him do so many times.

“How so?”

“You were hoping for a pliant, biddable girl, and instead you got me. Do note that I am not apologizing.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.” She must be paying too much attention to his neck, because she notices when he swallows. “I wouldn’t want you to.”

They complete another circuit of the ballroom, and she notices his gaze start to drift over her shoulder. “You know what I do,” she says, “when we’re in negotiations and they’re being particularly infuriating?”

“The Fjerdans?”

“Anyone.”

“What do you do?”

“I start reciting the names of the youngest children in my head.” Grisha children are no longer compelled to relocate to the Little Palace, but many still do. Sometimes it is due to their family’s fear for their safety; sometimes it is due to their family’s fear of them. Dunyasha, Vasochnka, Petrushka. Olya, Mitya, Irinka. Always their diminutives, when she names them in her mind. It is what they deserve. She would have liked to have been Alinochnka to someone. “This is for them. I can endure this moment for them.”

“Do not forget,” he says, his voice low and serious, “that everything I’ve ever done, I did for them.”

The waltz ends, and he bows over her hand as she sinks into a deep curtsy.

He waits until she is looking him straight in the eye before he kisses the back of her hand.

She makes her excuses shortly after that.

It is not unusual for Alina to stay up another two hours or so once she has returned to her rooms after this kind of state affair. She likes to run herself a bath and heat up the samovar for tea before properly getting ready for bed. Especially after an evening of dancing, this routine normally puts her out like a—well.

She hears the clock chime three, which means she has been lying in bed wide awake for the last hour. Her mind keeps picking at the situation with Aleksander—whatever it actually is. Part of the issue is that she has trouble defining the problem, or rather, figuring out how the various problems interconnect.

The political interference was the most pressing thing, although now she suspects that danger is passed. She has absolutely no faith that he'll stop annoying the shit out of her, though, if he thinks that's the only way she'll pay attention to him.

And then there's the overwhelming urge to take all her clothes off and suggest they have a go at destroying each other.

Rolling over yet again, she squeezes her eyes shut and buries her face in a pillow. All she can see is him kissing her hand after the waltz. Saints, she doesn't think she could ever forget his mouth. For weeks she has been imagining all the good use he could put it to.

She asks herself why she even wants to, and to her great irritation is able to come up with a long list that begins with "it would probably be really good," continues with an embarrassing number of bullet points detailing why it would probably be really good, and ends with "there's the off chance it will put him a better mood and he will stop annoying me so much."

She huffs an annoyed sigh, swings herself out of bed, and pulls a dressing gown on over her nightdress.

She sends a few soft streaks of light under his door before twisting a sunbeam through the keyhole to unlock it from the inside. If he is asleep, which she doubts, she's hoping the light will wake him up and give him enough time to realize who it is before he gets any ideas about suffocating intruders with shadows.

Her plan works; he sits up in bed just as she slips inside.

"Alina?"

"It's me, yes," she assures him, padding silently over to a chair by the banked fire. She curls her legs up and pulls her dressing gown around her more tightly.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. His voice is more bewildered than anything else. Maybe he was asleep. She feels rather bad about waking him, if he was; she doesn't think he gets much sleep. On the one hand, perhaps that's what he deserves—part of her certainly recoils at the idea that he sleeps long and soundly, untroubled by his actions. What's more, she recoils at the idea that she might one day do the same.

On the other hand, he's a cranky bastard when he hasn't slept, and that creates more problems for her.

"I got tired of waiting to fuck you," she answers.

There's a long silence, and she resents the fact that he keeps his bedroom this dark.

"Did you, now?" he finally says, drawing the words out. So dramatic, she thinks. "I didn't realize you wanted to."

He can't be serious. "I think you're lying."

She hears the bed shift as he gets out of it. By the time she summons a ball of light and sends it drifting toward the fireplace, he's wrapping himself in a black dressing gown and walking over to her. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"If you're going to keep lying to me," she says, bracing her hands on the arms of the chair, "I'll leave."

His hands fly to her wrists, pinning them. "No." It isn't a command.

Her gaze flicks from his hands to his face. His expression is still guarded. She decides to see how far she needs to push him.

"Let me go, Aleksander." Not angry, but not asking, either.

His gaze is steady, but something about his face suddenly seems so young. "If I do, will you leave?"

Ah. Well, if this is how they're going to get to the bottom of this, she isn't complaining. At least they're discussing it in the first place, and if she plays her cards right, it might even be enjoyable. "I will if you don't stop lying to me."

"I wasn't lying."

"So all those weeks ago in your study," she says, deciding it's time to pay him back for all the ways he's tormented her recently, like a boy pulling on her braids, "when I made you look at me, when your mouth fell open like you couldn't stop thinking about what you wanted to put in it, you thought I didn't want to fuck you?"

She's no Heartreander, but she swears she can catch the moment his heart starts to beat faster. "You were angry."

"Since when has that ever stopped people from sleeping together?" she asks. "Do you want the truth? Unlike some people, *I* don't make a habit of lying."

He studies her face for a few moments before he whispers, "Tell me."

"I thought about pulling you to the floor and having you right there, in front of the fire." His eyes drift closed. *Mm*, she thinks. *Victory*. The first of many tonight, she hopes. "Would you

have liked that? Me climbing on top of you, shoving my fingers in your hair and kissing you senseless? Working my hands under your clothes, pulling your trousers down and fucking you on the bare floor?"

"Saints, Alina." His breathing has become shallow.

"I think you mean Sankta Alina."

His eyes fly open at that.

"One last time," she says, letting light seep into her hand, reminding him that she has ways of making him let her go. "What do you want?"

It's almost beautiful, watching his careful expression slip away as he gives in to her, to himself. He goes to his knees in front of her, and oh, she thinks, all the majesty of her throne is nothing to this. "Don't leave me. Please, Alina, don't leave me."

His eyes are shining, his hands trembling against her wrists. She flexes her own hands gently and he lets go as though he's been burned. (He hasn't, but she appreciates watching him remember that he could be.)

"That's what all this is about?" He looks away from her. It makes its own sort of sense, she supposes—she doesn't back down when she's angry; she likes to face things head on. Which means that when he upsets her, she goes slamming doors all the way through Little Palace until she's slamming the door of his rooms.

"Oh, Sasha." She reaches a hand out to stroke his cheek. He leans into the caress, then turns his face to kiss her palm. "You are a fool." She's said those words to him so many times, but tonight it comes without heat. Tonight it's almost an endearment. She moves her hand to stroke a lock of hair away from his forehead.

"I want—" he starts, but cuts himself short.

"Go on, tell me."

"I want to believe you." She strokes the shell of his ear, the line of his neck. "I want to believe *in* you," he whispers, voice hitching as her index finger trails down the line of his throat. "When you talk about the future, a future for Grisha. I want you to be right. But I have lived so long, seen too much, lost too much."

She can't stop herself from smiling. "That's why we're suited. I am young, which makes me angry and stubborn, and you are old, which makes you angry and stubborn." This startles a laugh from him that sounds something like a whine. "Think of what we could do. Me with my castles in the air, you with your long memory. The one thing I need you to do..." She leans toward him so their lips are almost brushing. "Is stop fighting me." Tilting her head as though she's going for a kiss, she tugs his bottom lip between her teeth.

Before he can move to make something more out of it, she's leaning back in the chair, both hands returned to the armrests. It's time to test an idea she's had since that day in his study.

“If you can’t believe in me yet,” she says, drinking in the sight of his face, almost rapturous, eyes dark and deep and shining, “you could try serving me.”

He makes an indescribable sound that she immediately decides she will need to hear again.

“You said you—got tired?” he asks.

“Of waiting to fuck you, yes.”

“Why were you waiting?”

“Self-respect.”

“And would you...lose that self-respect, if we did go to bed?”

She studies his face, trying to read everything he won’t say outright. She’s gotten several important admissions already tonight, and she expects she won’t get more. “I wouldn’t,” she says, somewhat tentatively, and a slight relaxation in his face tells her this was the answer he hoped for. “In fact, I rather think it’s my due.”

“What is?” he prompts.

“You on your knees like this, just waiting for me to tell you what to do. And, for once, I can be sure you’ll do it.”

He’s leaning toward her at such an angle she’s surprised he hasn’t toppled face first into her lap yet. “I’ll do anything you say.”

She sighs and rolls her shoulders as if all the tension has suddenly left them. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say that.” And then she’s leaning forward to kiss him.

Aleksander True-Patronymic-Unknown Morozov has always been a single-minded kisser, but Alina learns that what she previously thought of as his undivided attention has nothing on his undivided attention when he has quite literally been panting after her. His hands frame her face; she can feel the gentle pressure of his fingers against the roundness of her cheeks as he kisses her again and again, the tip of his tongue slipping between her parted lips, his beard rasping against her mouth. The dull ache between her legs that’s been tormenting her since they danced flares to a new sharpness.

She twists a hand in his hair and guides him away from her mouth to her neck. The feeling of his beard and teeth against her skin is indescribable, and when he reaches the neckline of her dressing gown she whispers, “Take it off,” and feels his hands go to the ties at her waist. He slips the dressing gown down and she shrugs out of it as he kisses her bare shoulder.

“A thin nightdress for early spring,” he murmurs.

“I run hot.”

He laughs, and she loves the sound of it. “Of course you do, solnyshka.” He kisses her collarbone, the tops of her breasts, and is about to nuzzle her through the fabric of her

nightdress when she tugs his head back. He makes a satisfied-sounding grunt and she files that bit of information away for further use.

“Not there,” she says, letting go of his hair and bracing both of her hands on his shoulders before giving him a shove that sends him toppling backward.

She swears his face is almost glowing as he looks up at her from the floor. “Where then?” he asks, voice hoarse.

Alina uncurls her legs from the chair and lets her knees fall open, the soft linen of her nightdress draped across them. “Wait,” she says when he starts to move. “Crawl to me.”

Slowly, dreamlike, he gets to his knees and does as she says, his eyes on the floor.

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” she asks. He nods. “You would crawl to me through dust and dirt if I asked, wouldn’t you?” When he starts to nod again, still staring at the floor, she says, “Answer me.”

“Yes.”

“And you’d like it.”

“Yes.”

She tilts his head up using only the tips of her fingers. His hair is falling over his forehead again, he’s blushing furiously, his lips are red and full in that way that only comes from biting and kissing. “You’re a vision.”

“No,” he breathes. “You.”

“Sweet,” she smiles, then grabs his hair and tugs his head so he’s leaning away from her. “Beg me.”

“Alina, Sun Queen, Sankta, please.”

“Please what?”

“Let me kiss your cunt. Please, Alina.” She raises her eyebrows, waits. “It’s all I can think of,” he continues. “It’s all I’ve thought of for weeks.” Ironically, now that she’s made such a point about leaving if he lies to her, she doesn’t even care if these words are true. “Please, let me taste you, Alina, please, I can *smell* you, please let me—”

“Go on, then,” she says, trying not to gasp it. She lets go of his hair and drapes her legs over his shoulders as he pushes her nightdress up to her waist. She’s aching and wet and when he licks at her slit it takes effort not to scream.

“Let me hear you?” he asks. “Please, Sankta Alina of the light, help me believe.”

“You stop when I say you stop,” she answers, but she grants his request as soon as his mouth is back on her. All *Saints*, it’s better than her nighttime fantasies, and she has a vivid

imagination. He rolls his tongue against the swollen bud of her clit and she decides she either has to talk or be resigned to making noises she truly does not want to answer for. “Well, it’s nice to know you’re good for something.” He moans against her and she nearly grinds herself against his face. “If you’re half as good at actually governing as you are at licking my cunt we’ll be dictating terms for every trade deal and treaty in no time at all. Think of how you’ll be remembered. Fondly, for once.”

She can feel his tongue inside her, can feel pleasure building like concentrated light, which occasionally becomes a bit literal, in her case. “Or perhaps you don’t care about that. Perhaps all you’ll want them to know is that there was a Sun Summoner and that you were devoted to her. Always at her s-side, never went behind her back about negotia—*Sasha*, fuck!” His tongue is working her clit again as he slips a finger inside her, and she knows she is about to lose her words soon, so she makes the last ones count. “Believed in her and fucked her long and well and didn’t care who—who knew...” And then she has nothing but a small moan from between tight-pressed lips, and her fingers in his hair as she holds him to her, and wave after wave of bright pleasure radiating from where his mouth is on her.

He keeps her going like that for a while, with his tongue and his hand. When she’s come down just enough to feel oversensitive, she loosens her hold on his hair and says, “Shh, that’s enough, that’s enough.” When he raises his head just enough to get a breath, she cups the back of his head. “Now say thank you.”

“Thank you.” He sounds he’s been running, like he’s desperate. Like he’s relieved. “Thank you, Alina.”

She lets him go and he sits back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. When he can bring himself to look at her again, he says, “I didn’t, you know. Want someone pliant and biddable.”

“You thought you did.”

He holds her gaze. “Then I was a fool.”

Alina throws her head back and laughs until she has to wipe tears from her eyes. “Oh, it was all worth it, just to hear you say that.”

“I would hope it was all worth it for other reasons as well,” he says, indignant.

“Hush.” She braces the ball of her foot against his shoulder and he realizes she’s considering pushing him over again.

“I’ll be good,” he promises in a rush.

She gives him a wry smile. “Will you, now?” The words drip off her tongue like honey from a spoon. “I don’t think you can be. I don’t think you know how.”

“You could show me.”

“I think that sounds like an awful lot of work for me. I think I might just prefer using you.”

“For what?”

“Sex. Warmth. Power.”

She would be worried about him collapsing if he wasn't already sitting on the floor. “Yes,” he breathes. “Use me, Alina. Use me for whatever you need. Just don't leave me.”

“I'm not going anywhere,” she assures him. “Except possibly to your bed, if you think you can carry me. I've had a long day and I don't feel like walking.”

Clearly this is enough of an enticement for him to find strength from somewhere, because he stands and scoops her up with apparently little effort. She wraps her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist and kisses him, slow and thorough, just because she feels like it. “Bed,” she whispers, and he walks them over and deposits her gently on the tumbled blankets. “Not a sound sleeper?” she asks.

“Depends on the night.”

He starts to go to his knees again, but she stops him with, “Ah-ah. Strip.” She braces her hands behind her and leans back to watch him shed his dressing gown and nightshirt. The ball of light still hovering in the vicinity of the fireplace begins to drift toward the bed so she can see him better.

Saints, he looks good, she thinks, raking her eyes over him. She could stay up all night exploring his body. “I'm so glad I did this,” she says before she can stop herself.

He raises his eyebrows. “And that would be because...?”

“Well, keftas leave a lot to the imagination. Now I know which of my suspicions have been confirmed.”

“Suspicions?”

“Aleksander, don't be daft. Do you really think I haven't imagined you? Haven't you imagined me?”

“Well. I didn't think you would have liked me to admit it.”

“I think it's time we stop hiding things from each other. Now take my night rail off, don't make me wait.”

He steps close to her and pulls the nightdress over her head. His hands are warm through the linen and warmer still when they return to her waist after discarding her clothing somewhere on the floor. She caresses the back of his neck with one hand, guiding his forehead to rest against hers, and reaches between his legs with her other hand.

“My my.” She ghosts a kiss across his lips as he gives up a small gasp. “Have you touched yourself like this,” she asks, stroking him lightly, “while you think of me?”

“Yes,” he breathes.

“Tell me. Tell me what you imagined.”

“You, unafraid. Of me, of everything. So eager. I dreamed of tumbling you in my bed for hours, of us exhausting each other. Nothing—” he hisses through his teeth as she presses a thumb beneath the head of his cock. “Nothing secret between us.”

“And you didn’t think to come to me?”

“I needed it to be you. I needed to know you wanted me badly enough.”

“Here’s how badly I want you,” she tells him. “You made me come so hard I couldn’t see straight, and I’m already aching for you again.” She gives him another stroke, firmer this time. “Still my servant?”

“Yes,” he breathes. “Forever.”

“Forever is a long time, and you will have to work for my trust. Promise me tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

“And the day after that.”

“Yes, the day after that, *please*, Alina.”

“Fine, then.” *You can build forever on a long line of tomorrows.* She kisses him, soft and quick. “Now. On the bed. On your back.”

Neither of them stifle themselves as she sinks down onto him.

“You feel incredible,” he groans.

“So do you. *Fuck.*”

They stop talking after that; it’s late, they’ve been awake for a very long time, and concentrating on more than one thing at once is becoming impossible. Alina focuses all her attention on how Aleksander feels beneath her, inside her, and this was the right decision, this was what she needed, his hands gripping her waist, his body rolling under hers, the taste of his skin, the smell of his hair.

“What you need to understand, Sasha,” she says, when she’s close, pressing her fingers to her clit as he moves inside her, “is that I may be stuck with you for the rest of my long life, but you are also stuck with me. And I made that choice. It was mine.”

He gasps as she comes around him, and follows her soon after.

They clean each other up, after, and Aleksander wraps them both in the same blanket. They don’t bother to put their clothes back on.

“Did you mean everything you said?” he asks softly, pressing kisses to the back of her neck. He can’t seem to stop kissing her, now that they’re basking in the afterglow. She doesn’t mind.

“Well, ideally I would do more than just use you. But I did mean the rest of it. I chose this. I won’t let you be alone. I think we could accomplish incredible things together.” *Like you promised so long ago*, she thinks, but decides not to say. “And you? What about everything you said?”

“Every word is true. I want to believe in you, I want to serve you. I want—” He cuts himself off.

She takes one of his hands in both of hers and bring it to her mouth for a kiss. “We’ve shared too much already for you to start hiding now, Sashenka.”

“I’ve spent a long time hiding. Sometimes you might have to come find me.”

“Alright.”

She feels the rhythm of his breathing against her back. He’s quiet for so long that she starts to think he’s fallen asleep. “I want to love you,” he finally says. “But I’m not sure I know how.”

Alina snuggles deeper into his arms. “And I want to love you,” she answers. “So. We can learn together.”

“Tomorrow and tomorrow?”

“And tomorrow,” she agrees. “Now go to sleep.”

“Goodnight, solnyshka.”

They spend the next morning in their dressing gowns negotiating who gets which pastries on the breakfast tray and discussing strategy for securing an alliance with Novyi Zem. If anyone who stops by Aleksander’s rooms is surprised to see Alina there in a state of deshabelle, they carefully arrange their faces so it doesn’t show.

It is just after breakfast that Genya is first heard to say, “Told you,” to David.

End Notes

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